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SUBJECT: CODEL ENGEL: HAITIAN ISSUES DOMINATE VISIT TO THE
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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[B.](#) SANTO DOMINGO 3250

[¶1.](#) (SBU) SUMMARY: The December 9-10 Congressional visit led by Rep. Eliot Engel touched some of the most sensitive points in the Dominican psyche. The group had intended to learn about a range of issues, but their trip, truncated by a late departure from Washington, was defined in the Dominican media by their visit to two sugarcane worker communities ("bateyes") housing residents of Haitian descent. The delegation met with Foreign Minister Morales Troncoso and several legislators, who gave them an earful about the domestic problems Dominicans blame on Haiti's instability. Rep. Engel raised with the Foreign Minister complaints he had received from his Dominican-American constituents about exorbitant fees charged by the Dominican consulate in New York. At the Port of Caucedo, managed by DP World and approved by DHS for the Container Security Initiative (CSI), visitors praised security but lamented that less than 100 percent of containers bound for the United States were scanned. END SUMMARY.

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CONTROVERSY ARRIVES EARLY
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[¶2.](#) (U) CODEL Engel was originally scheduled to visit the Dominican Republic during the weekend of December 8-10. Rep. Eliot Engel, the incoming Chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, led the group, which included six Democratic members of the U.S. Congress. Engel represents a district in New York with a large Dominican community. Other members of the delegation included Donald Payne (D-NJ), Barbara Lee (D-CA), Kendrick Meek (D-FL), Maxine Waters (D-CA), and Lynn Woolsey (C-CA). All of the Members, with the exception of Meek, currently serve on the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere.

[¶3.](#) (U) During the week prior to CODEL Engel's arrival, the popular local newspaper "Listin Diario" obtained a draft copy of the CODEL's schedule and headlined the visit as an "investigation" of working conditions on Dominican sugar plantations. The suggested itinerary obtained and published by the newspaper included a visit to a sugar refinery owned by the Vicini Group, the second-largest sugar company in the country; a tour of a sugar cane worker community ("batey") owned by the Vicini Group, led by company officials; a meeting with human rights activists on a batey located on government property; briefings by groups on both sides of the DR-CAFTA debate; and a visit to Caucedo, the country's premier port, which is managed by Dubai Ports World ("DP World") and was approved this year for the Container Security Initiative (CSI) by DHS.

¶4. (U) Despite the breadth of issues on the CODEL's draft schedule, the Dominican media focused exclusively on the group's visit to two bateyes. Batey residents are mostly Haitians or persons of Haitian descent. Dominican relations with the country's Haitian minority are extremely sensitive. A variety of international organizations and governments have complained about the mistreatment and isolation Haitians and their descendants experience in the Dominican Republic, but most Dominicans respond with open hostility to such foreign "interventions." Before long, an enterprising journalist managed to uncover Rep. Engel's association with legislation condemning "slavery-like conditions" in Brazilian factories. From this point forward the dominant motif in Dominican media coverage was that the CODEL had arrived solely to investigate allegations of slavery of Haitian workers on Dominican sugar plantations.

LATE ARRIVAL, MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

¶5. (SBU) The late arrival of the CODEL resulted in the cancellation of a meeting with President Fernandez and a dinner hosted at the Foreign Ministry. It also forced the group to compress the remaining items on their agenda considerably. The visits to bateyes and the sugar mill lasted longer than anticipated, and the group fell far behind schedule. They arrived 90 minutes late to their meeting that evening with Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso, for example, and were two hours late to the reception in their honor.

A VISIT WITH THE VICINIS

¶6. (SBU) The CODEL's first stop was the Cristobal Colon sugar refinery, owned by the Vicini Group. The Vicini Group is the second-largest producer of sugar in the Dominican Republic and has been mentioned in the Department's recent Human Rights Reports. Refs A and B document many of the human rights concerns that the company's operations have triggered, and the role played by Father Christopher Hartley in focusing international attention on the company's practices.

¶7. (SBU) Felipe Vicini, a major shareholder, and Campos de Moya, the facility manager, led the tour. Journalists from CNN, AP, and EFE (the Spanish-language wire service) accompanied the delegation throughout their visit to the site. The tour began with a walkthrough of the company's sugar refinery, and a discussion of trade and export issues. Visitors then proceeded to a batey that housed company employees on company property. According to human rights organizations, the batey the group visited, which was located alongside the highway, was one of the company's better ones. It featured new, relatively clean housing for workers and their families. Felipe Vicini explained that the company also provided a school for the children of their workers, and that they educated children without regard to their legal status in the country. He scoffed at questions about whether workers faced any sort of economic disincentives dissuading them from leaving their jobs.

ACTIVISTS GIVE THEIR SIDE

¶8. (SBU) The group then proceeded to a batey located on government-owned land, where they met with representatives from CEDAIL, a human rights organization affiliated with the Catholic Church. CEDAIL said they had selected this batey, where living conditions were much poorer than at the Vicini-owned community, because its conditions more accurately reflected those found at Vicini bateyes situated

further from the highway. The visiting congressional representatives began their visit with a spontaneous conversation with a group of young children, who described working in the fields.

¶9. (SBU) After a tour of the community, the group proceeded to a local church, where they met privately with two Vicini laborers who were concerned about reprisal if the company learned of their actions. Media were excluded. The workers, who were dressed in cane-cutting garments and apparently had been pulled from the fields that day, said that the company did not provide employees with medical benefits or schooling.

They said the only available public facilities were located so far away as to be effectively inaccessible. They also highlighted the fact that the company withheld a portion of their pay for social security and medical benefits - money, they say, they never see again. Finally, they disputed the

Vicini claim that the company has no disincentives to prevent employees from leaving their jobs. Contradicting the Vicini briefing, workers stated that the company withheld a portion of their pay until the end of the harvest, in order to ensure that they did not leave their jobs.

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ACCORDING TO THE FOREIGN MINISTER AND FRIENDS...
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¶10. (U) The group then proceeded to the Foreign Ministry for a meeting with Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso. The Foreign Minister had invited a multi-party group of Dominican legislators to attend. Rep. Engel emphasized to the group that his delegation had not come to the Dominican Republic to "point fingers" at anyone. Rather, they had come for the purpose of introducing themselves to the country and learning about a wide range of issues.

¶11. (SBU) Rep. Engel specifically highlighted the high fees charged by the Dominican consulate in New York to many of his Dominican-American constituents. In his response, Morales Troncoso acknowledged the problem and said that he would not permit such abuses to continue. He assured the delegation that he personally would resolve the problem. (On December 14 the Ministry announced that it had instructed Dominican consulates to reduce passport fees by USD 30.)

¶12. (SBU) Following this discussion, the Dominican

legislators each gave long, at times disjointed speeches complaining about the problems their country suffers due to Haiti's instability, and asserting their country's right to set its own migratory policy. They pointed fingers (literally) and demanded that the United States and others take stronger action to address Haiti's instability.

¶13. (SBU) Morales Troncoso had Dominican domestic politics in mind in his choice of participants. Dip. Radhames Castro of Boca Chica had denounced the Codel visit the previous day, offering the press the lie that Fr. Hartley had guided the group incognito on Friday. Castro told the press afterwards that the Democrats of the CODEL were gathering information to justify a reduction in the (generous) U.S. sugar quota. Dip. Pellegrin Castillo from a splinter party allied with the PLD is notorious for the vehemence of his anti-Haiti views; later in the week he asserted that the aim of the United States was to unite Hispaniola as a single country. The PRSC's "Ito" Bisono is thoughtful and represents San Pedro de Macoris, in the heart of the sugar district. Max Puig, the country's Secretary of the Environment, discussed the environmental

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degradation Haitians were creating in the border regions. And the Foreign Minister included Amb. Miguel Mejia, the President's representative to hard-line leftist regimes and Venezuela, probably because of Mejia's anti-U.S. credentials.

¶14. (SBU) The delegation arrived late to a reception at the

Ambassador's residence. Many of the guests, especially high-level officials, had already left. They nonetheless had opportunities for fruitful discussions with human rights activists, like the recipient of the 2006 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, and with executives at the local American Chamber of Commerce, who stressed the social benefits that implementation of DR-CAFTA would have for the country.

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A VISIT TO A DP WORLD-OPERATED PORT
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¶15. (U) The next morning, immediately prior to their mid-day departure to Haiti, the delegation visited the Port of Caucedo, which is the country's newest and most advanced sea port. It was approved this year by DHS for the Container Security Initiative (CSI). The port is managed by DP World.

¶16. (SBU) The delegation toured the port's facilities, especially those related to CSI operations. DHS staff gave a demonstration of an x-ray scan of a shipping container and explained that given the high volume of traffic, they were able to scan only a limited number of such containers.

¶17. (U) Rep. Kendrick Meek, who serves on the House Committee on Homeland Security, said that he would make it a personal priority to seek increased staffing and funding levels so that "every container" destined for the United States could be inspected.

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LOCAL PRESS REACTION
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¶18. (U) Rep. Engel held an exit conference with members of the local press. The delegation professed surprise at the hostile reaction to their visit to the bateyes. They emphasized that they had come to the Dominican Republic to learn about a wide variety of issues. They acknowledged that they were concerned by the living conditions workers encountered on the bateyes, however, they would be concerned at such conditions anywhere in the world, and they were not trying to point fingers at anyone. The CODEL did its best to steer the conference toward their tour of the port and other less divisive topics.

¶19. (U) Nonetheless, the media refused to deviate from its focus on the delegation's interest in "Haitian issues." Over succeeding days, local newspapers barely mentioned the group's visit to the port, and they cherry-picked out-of-context quotes to give the impression that the group had come solely to investigate bateyes. Foreign Minister Morales Troncoso told the press that his country would not accept any foreign interference, and he harrumphed that the delegation had been "sequestered in a church by NGO activists." Since then the local media has been dwelling on the visit. The subject of living conditions in the country's bateyes has received new life in public discussions.

¶20. (U) Although most commentators criticize the delegation for poking its nose into affairs that are none of its business, some have defended the visit. They say that conditions in the bateyes are as bad as the delegation said, and in fact much worse. Some said that the country will need to take a hard look at its treatment of Haitians and Dominican-Haitians in the years to come.

¶21. (SBU) The Vicini Group has communicated to the Embassy that Embassy visitors are no longer welcome on its property.

¶22. (U) Drafted by Alexander T. Bryan.

¶23. (U) This report and extensive other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/>

